

INSIDE

TRACKS

Zones Proposed to Reduce Cougar Conflicts

Considered by many to be the most awesome predator in North America, mountain lions, or cougars, are on a roll. Cougars have reclaimed most of their former habitats in Montana; they are now found in 42 of 56 counties. With increased numbers of subdivisions and other developments, cougars and humans could be headed for a collision.

To some people, cougars have become a threat, moving into towns, feeding on pets, and threatening children. Others value cougars as magnificent symbols of the mountain west. In fact, experts say that these divergent human attitudes towards cougars will play the pivotal role in the future of the big cats in Montana.

According to FWP Biologist Shawn Riley, the state's lion expert, humans and lions must learn to live together. "Cougars are here to stay, at fairly high levels in Montana and throughout the West, at least for the short term," he said. "Anywhere there's deer or elk, there's going to be cougars."

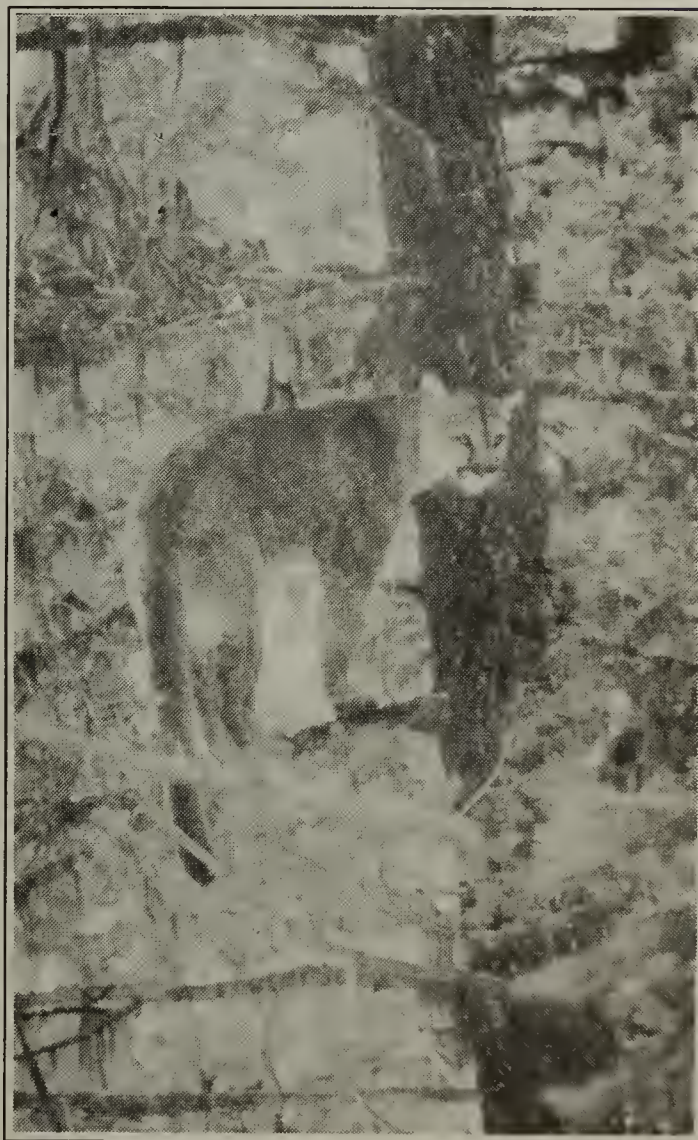
Riley attributes the increase in mountain lions to two factors. "I believe we have a broader distribution of ungulates (deer, elk, antelope, and

moose) in Montana than ever before," he said. "Combine this with the increased protection for mountain lions, and decrease in gray wolves, and you have an equation that has led to a sharp increase in the lion population."

Cougars were removed from the bounty list in 1962 by the Montana legislature, and declared a game animal in 1971. "This increased the social value of mountain lions; they became more valuable in people's minds," said Riley. Improvement of grazing practices in streamside areas, irrigation of agricultural crops, improved forestry, and other factors led to an increase in deer, their preferred prey.

"If we're going to maintain wild, wild cougars, we will have to focus on their management in large areas of wild land," said Riley. "With the level of subdivisions and other developments in cougar habitat, I'm afraid that a significant segment of the cougar population is destined to live among people. In that case, we're really not talking about wild, wild cats anymore, we're talking about mildly wild cats, or town cats."

Riley added that even if a cat doesn't interact directly with humans, it may be in danger. "People will say, 'not in my back yard', and cougars will not be tolerated," he said. "And we won't have the option of reducing the number of cougars in those areas through hunting—in those private



lands hunting won't be allowed because of the level of development. We'll end up with a bunch of town cats, and we might be stuck with them."

How should FWP manage cougars in light of these issues? Said Riley, "I'm proposing something similar to what we've done along the east front of the Continental Divide in respect to grizzly bears. I believe we should establish cougar management zones, or zones of conflict resolution, on a state-wide basis. In cooperation with the (Continued on Page 2)

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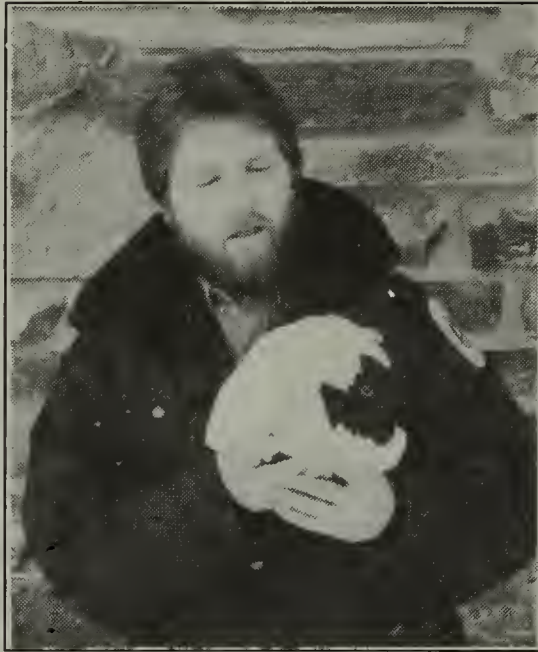
Reducing Cougar Conflicts...

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public, we would establish zones where we will manage for cougars, zones where they will be tolerated at present levels, and zones where they will not be tolerated."

Riley cited the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex and most National Forest land as Zone 1, or areas where cougars would be encouraged (basically by managing for their prey). Zone 2 could include foothills of the Swan mountains and other mountain ranges; locally, that would include the Lake Blaine area to Jewel Basin. Examples of Zone 3 areas could include a radius around Somers, Bigfork and Lakeside, the Flathead Valley between Highways 93 and 35, or the Bitterroot Valley south of Missoula.

"We need to establish these zones with full public input," said Riley. "And we need to be serious about it. When



COUGAR EXPERT Shawn Riley holds a skull of the animal he calls "the perfect predator." Riley has prepared a brochure called "Living with Mountain Lions," and has been working on a plan to manage cougars in Montana.

we say cougars will not be tolerated, that means being aggressive and immediately taking out cougars that frequent areas close to humans. Where possible, we will use hunting as a management tool in each zone."

Based on his extensive experience with mountain lions, Riley believes that zone management will be best for lions and people. "I believe this is the best way to lend predictability to our management actions, and reduce problems between lions and people. People will know what to expect in each zone, whether they're living there now, plan to move there, or plan to recreate there. We're open to suggestions; it's critical that we develop a plan that both people and cougars can live with."

As part of his work, Riley has prepared a brochure, "Living with Mountain Lions". The brochure is available at all FWP and U.S. Forest Service offices.

Kids Pitch In at Steel Bridge Fishing Access



DOING SOMETHING ABOUT LITTER. Leader Alice Ford and members of the Students for Environmental Awareness Club helped clean the west access at the Steel Bridge near Kalispell. The kids got involved because of a genuine concern for the future.

IT'S A CLEANER PLACE. The Steel Bridge Fishing Access Site is cleaner thanks also to scouts who picked up trash and wrapped the base of cottonwood trees to protect them from beavers.

Three of those scouts are Tammi Postlethwaite, Robin Wyatt, and Desiree Ballard.



The Steel Bridge Fishing Access Site near Kalispell is a cleaner place thanks to a group of Kalispell area Girl Scouts and an environmental club from Hedges Elementary School.

Scouts from five troops found out first-hand about litter when they picked up trash along the east and west banks of the Flathead River at the access site. The 15 girls, led by Harriet Counsell and five other leaders, found everything from fishing line to cans, bottles and other trash. The scouts also wrapped hardware cloth around the base of 30 cottonwood trees to protect the trees from the teeth of active beavers in the area.

A few days later, nine fourth and fifth graders from the Students for Environmental Awareness Club at Hedges School, recleaned the west river bank at the access. According to club member Gini Harper, kids got involved because of a genuine concern for the future.

"We're worried that some people don't seem to care," she said. "Pollution is like the national debt. Unless we all do something, it's going to keep getting worse."

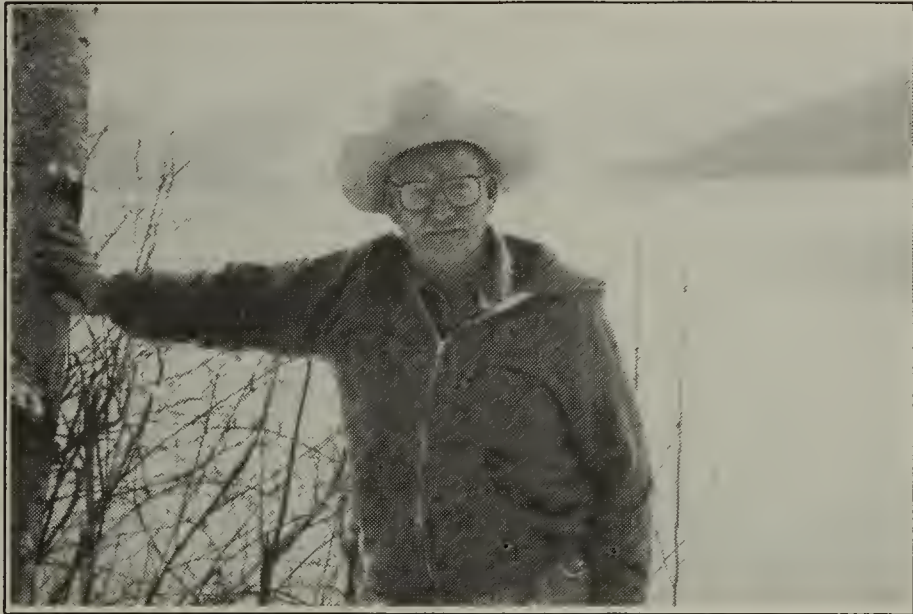
Tug of War Continues over Ashley Lake Water

In the West, conflicts over water have been as common as conflicts over gold. As one saying goes, more people have been shot over water than anything else. In the Ashley Creek drainage west of Kalispell, residents have quarreled over water use for decades.

And according to fisheries worker Gary Anderson, water users in the drainage want more than the water can provide.

"The lakeshore owners want lake levels kept high for recreational uses such as boating, water skiing, swimming and fishing," said Anderson. "Downstream landowners want adequate streamflows, and ranchers are concerned about too much water flooding hay fields during haying time. It's physically impossible to please everyone."

According to a 1979 agreement in District Court, FWP is charged with balancing the conflicting demands for



A UNIQUE POSITION. Frank Gamma is an Ashley lakeshore resident as well as a downstream landowner along Ashley Creek, so he sees several sides to the problem of water use in the Ashley drainage.

Ashley Lake water, while providing instream flows for fish and wildlife. Anderson bears the responsibility of operating the headgate at the outlet of Ashley Lake to account for water inflow, outflow and evaporation.

"We try to maintain a reasonable lake level, which is not easy during drought years," said Anderson. "If we hold too much water back, the creek dries up, and we can't have that. Yet, as lakeshore owners say, they didn't buy their property to end up 100 feet from the water."

FWP management has focused on providing at least a minimum year-long streamflow for spawning of important fish populations, like rainbow trout and brook trout. Minimum streamflows also provide dilution to meet water quality standards below the Kalispell sewage treatment plant.

The conflict over Ashley Lake water is an old one. "It seems like the conflict has smoothed out quite a bit," said lakeshore resident Frank Gamma. "It used to be much worse. I was looking for someone to get shot sooner or later." Gamma is in the unique position of owning a lakeshore home and land downstream along Ashley Creek.

According to Gamma, the old Irrigation District would shut down the lake outflow in the fall to conserve water, while people who lived downstream along the creek wanted a flow of water to continue.

"It was a running conflict," said Gamma. "We had some fellows down

in the meadows who couldn't leave the gate alone. One guy would turn the water on, and another would come an hour later and turn the water off. Sometimes the gate would be changed four times in one day. We had the sheriff hiding in the brush for a while. We were headed for a lawsuit or worse."

Finally, three ranchers filed a lawsuit against the old irrigation district because of a water use conflict. An attempt to resolve the problem led to the 1979 agreement in which FWP acquired the responsibility to maintain the headgate and balance water use.

Anderson has found it difficult to release enough water from the headgate to deliver the needed instream flow of 10 cubic feet per second at the creek's mouth, and still satisfy all the water users along the way.

"During July 1989, for example, we were releasing 17 cubic feet per second from the lake, but only 4 cubic feet per second was reaching Kalispell," he said. "I couldn't release more water because that would have flooded hay meadows in the upper valley." Anderson attempts to solve water shortage problems by asking water rights holders along the stream to curtail use during dry periods.

The tug of war over Ashley Creek water is likely to continue. "We could benefit by a more flexible operating scheme," said Anderson. "But the diversity of uses and unpredictable precipitation will make it tough even with our best efforts." ❧



REGULATING THE ASHLEY CREEK HEADGATE is fisheries worker Gary Anderson. In 1979, FWP was given the responsibility to maintain the headgate and balance water use in the drainage. The conflict over water is an old one, and FWP must balance the various demands for Ashley Lake water, while providing instream flows for fish and wildlife.

Zauner Receives Game Warden Assn. Award

Local businessman Fred Zauner received a special award from the Montana Game Warden Association for his support of wildlife law enforcement in the region. Zauner arranged for the loan of jet skis for wardens during water safety patrols.

"We would have no way of gaining access to this specialized equipment without Fred's help," said Warden Captain Ed Kelly.

"Our ability to conduct water safety

work last summer was greatly improved."

Montana Game Warden Association awards are given each year to a handful of Montanans who provide special support to wardens.

Ice Fishing Expert Lists Tips

Fisheries worker Gary Anderson is an ice fishing aficionado. He's fished waters in the Flathead all his life, and probably knows as much about the sport as anyone.

"The great thing about ice fishing is its simplicity," said Anderson. It's one of the cheapest forms of fishing—you don't need a boat, and you need only the simplest pole, line and lure."

Based on his long experience, Anderson believes the following:

- o Use light line, 4 to 6 pound test, to avoid spooking fish;
- o A Swedish Pimple or glo hook tipped with a maggot are two of the best all-around baits;

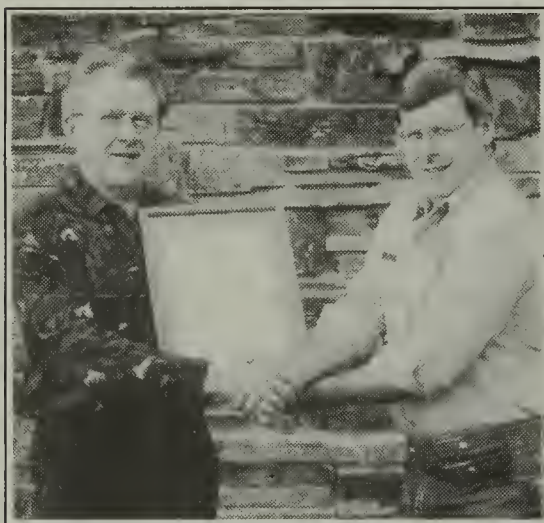
o Ask at sporting goods stores or ask ice anglers what they are using and where the fish are biting;

o Experiment at various water depths to find out where fish are biting;

o Fish during dusk and early morning for most fish species; try fishing during dark hours by lantern light;

o Look for concentrations of anglers on the ice—fish there.

Says Anderson, "Ice fishing is a great way to spend a few winter doldrum hours during any kind of weather, enjoying the outdoors. It's the only way to be on the lake without a boat."



SPECIAL AWARD. Fred Zauner received a Montana Game Warden Association Award from Warden Captain Ed Kelly. Zauner arranged for the loan of jet skis for water safety patrols.

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